

Local nonprofit agencies overwhelmed

WITH NUMBER OF NEEDY ON THE RISE, AGENCIES HARD-PRESSED TO PROVIDE FOR ALL

By Casey Weiss

It's a Monday afternoon, and Ramona and two of her children are making their daily rounds at the Community Service Agency's free grocery store, filling their basket with grains and beans for dinner.

For years Ramona only visited the agency once a week to supplement her own supply of food, but this year she lost her job as a nanny, and now primarily relies on the agency's nutrition and food programs to feed her family of six.

Ramona said she, her hus-

band and their four children cannot survive on her husband's salary from the mail services department at Stanford University. For \$3 every three

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ELBA LANDAVERDE

months, Ramona has access to the agency's food pantry, where clients can browse the shelves

of food four days a week at the Stierlin Road office near Central Expressway.

Staff members at the nonprofit, which serves low-income residents in Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills, said they have been seeing a lot of former customers returning, or increasing their frequency of visits, after recently losing jobs. Unlike many other providers in the region, food donations to CSA stayed at their normal level through the holidays; however, the agency is now serving

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more people. This is because of hard economic times, and because CSA has eased its qualifications: Previously families of four had to make just under \$32,000 a year to qualify, but this number is now up to \$53,000 or less.

"We had families that were making a good \$3,000 a month, and this is just not good enough now," said Elba Landaverde, program director for emergency assistance.

The agency is not alone, as many other local nonprofits and charity programs struggle to cope with an influx of clients. Some of these agencies are not as fortunate as CSA and saw a significant decrease in donations this holiday season. Workers at many local nonprofits have worried they will not have enough supplies to meet the growing demand.

Requests for help at Second Harvest, the huge purveyor of food for CSA and more than 300 other organizations, are up 55 percent. Second Harvest, which operates in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, saw more middle

income families looking for help, but only 17 percent of them qualified for the food assistance programs. Spokesperson Lynn

needed help before."

For the last six years, about 1,700 children have lined up outside the Mountain View Police

"Usually it is very low-income families, a lot of working poor. What we saw this year was a lot of people who never needed help before."

LYNN CROCKER

Crocker said Second Harvest had only planned for a 3 percent increase.

"Usually it is very low-income

Department near Christmas to receive toys as part of Cops That Care, a police program for low-income families. This year, due

Even though the holiday season is over, local agencies say they still need donations as they prepare for the economic downturn to continue.

families, a lot of working poor," Crocker said of Second Harvest clients. "What we saw this year was a lot of people who never

to a change in rules that required participants to wait in lines, only 1,400 children came — but founding police Officer Ron

Cooper said this turned out to be a good thing.

"If we had done 1,700 we would have been pressed for presents," Cooper said. "By the time we got to the end, we only had boxed games."

Cooper said Cops That Care received fewer donations this year, both from individuals and nonprofits.

The Family Giving Tree, a Milpitas organization that provides gifts to Cops That Care and to other programs for low-income families, had to dip into its savings for the first time to supply gifts. The companies that normally donate the most all had layoffs this year, and founder and executive Jennifer Cullenbine said she was expecting to see fewer gifts.

The organization had very few donations on Dec. 15, she said, which is normally the last day staff members accept donations. Desperate, the agency used up its reserves to buy gifts.

"We were looking at an empty warehouse and thinking these kids are not going to get gifts," Cullenbine said. "It wasn't good that we had to spend reserves, but I would be surprised if any of the 250 agencies we served didn't

need more help."

Thousands of presents came later, and the organization was able to exceed its goal of providing 50,000 gifts. But Cullenbine said the Family Giving Tree still was not able to fulfill all its requests.

Cullenbine is expecting 2009 to be worse, and is now looking for donations to start rebuilding reserves.

"This is the last hard year I hope," she said.

Even though the holiday season is over, local agencies say they still need donations as they prepare for the economic downturn to continue.

"Don't forget about us," Crocker. "The need is all year round." ■

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■ INFORMATION

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